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C O N F I D E N T I A L TALLINN 000255

SIPDIS

AMEMBASSY ANKARA PASS TO AMCONSUL ADANA
AMEMBASSY ASTANA PASS TO USOFFICE ALMATY
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL DUSSELDORF
AMEMBASSY BERLIN PASS TO AMCONSUL LEIPZIG
AMEMBASSY BELGRADE PASS TO AMEMBASSY PODGORICA
AMEMBASSY HELSINKI PASS TO AMCONSUL ST PETERSBURG
AMEMBASSY ATHENS PASS TO AMCONSUL THESSALONIKI
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL VLADIVOSTOK
AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PASS TO AMCONSUL YEKATERINBURG

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/08/26

TAGS: PREL PGOV EN GG

SUBJECT: Estonia Still Committed to Georgia

CLASSIFIED BY: Marc Nordberg, Political/Economic Chief; REASON:
1.4(B), (D)

Classified by CDA Karen Decker for Reasons 1.4 B and D.

¶1. (C) One year after Russia's invasion of Georgia, Estonia remains strongly committed to helping Georgia overcome the aftermath and avoid further hostilities. Estonia is driven both by a desire to share its own successful transformation with other post-Soviet states, and a fear that it too could fall victim (again) to Russian aggression. Harry Lahtien, former Director for the MFA's Eastern Europe and Central Asia Division (and now ChargC) in Minsk), told Polchief August 6 that Georgia is currently Estonia's highest assistance priority. Of the GOE's 40 million EEK [USD 3.7 million] in FY09 foreign assistance money, 12 million (30 percent) is slated for Georgia. The GOE works with Georgia's central and regional governments, as well as environmental groups, to build local governing capacity. Lahtien said Georgia will only be able to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia through economic means, by showing the residents in these areas that life would be better if they were part of Georgia. However, this strategy also has risks. Lahtien opined that one reason for the original conflict was that the GOG was rehabilitating ethnic Georgian villages in South Ossetia. He said these villages had nicer shops, better roads, and entertainment facilities, compared to Ossetian villages. Therefore, the government of South Ossetia initiated conflict when its own people began to question why Georgians lived better. Lahtien added that potential to engage exists, especially in Abkhazia. He said the Abkhaz do not particularly like Russia or Tbilisi, but are being alienated by Russian businessmen buying property in Abkhazia.

¶2. (SBU) Since 2005, the GOE has funded 31 projects in Georgia, providing USD two million in support. Many of the projects trained Georgian diplomats, civil servants, and police. Others, drawing on Estonia's strong experience, developed information technology projects for Georgian schools and government. Lahtien also said that Estonian companies have successfully moved into Georgia. Particularly successful investments involved producing hazelnuts and walnuts, and exporting wine. He stated that the nut production is occurring near the Abkhaz border, and was hurt by the war, but that production has rebounded in the past year. Other Estonian companies are currently looking into cold storage and transport for fruit.

¶3. (SBU) Georgian FM Gregory Vassadze echoed Lahtien's comments in a talk at the MFA in Tallinn on August 25. Vassadze said Estonia is one of Georgia's closest allies, that bilateral relations are exemplary, and that economic cooperation is growing. Vassadze praised the June visit to Georgia by Estonian FM Paet and a business delegation, and said Estonia and Georgia would sign agreements on investment and payment of pensions in September. Vassadze claimed his government is especially grateful that Estonia is sharing its experiences of post-Soviet reform, and NATO and EU accession.

¶4. (C) Kadri Liik, Director of the International Center for Defense Studies in Tallinn, told Polchief August 26 that Russia's invasion of Georgia was a sign that Russia will resort to violence to preserve its perceived sphere of influence. Estonia therefore is helping Georgia integrate into western structures, such as NATO. Liik said her institute, funded largely by Estonia's Ministry of Defense, has also conducted some training for Georgian diplomats and civil servants, particularly on civil-military relations. She fears that Russia would use some of the same pressure tactics it is employing in Georgia, such as "protection of nationals", in Estonia, and does not rule out a Russian invasion of Estonia in the medium term (note: many Estonians share such fears). Until Georgia is protected by NATO's Article V, Liik stated the international community, and particularly the U.S., should make clear to Russia that further use of force will not be tolerated - a viewpoint shared by the Estonian government in general.

DECKER